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Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., left; two men demonstrate a shoulder-launched missile.

Bush's do-nothing plan for airline security

When it comes to protecting passenger jets from a terrorist's shoulder-launched missile, the White House is taking a bargain-basement approach.

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By Paul Caffera

June 10, 2003 | When al-Qaida terrorists in Kenya failed in their effort to shoot down an Israeli charter jet with a shoulder-launched missile last November, airline security experts were relieved, but only briefly. Such an attack had long been expected, and though the missile missed its target that day, the experts urged that the near-miss be regarded as a wakeup call to airlines and governments worldwide.

A little more than six months later, the administration of President George W. Bush is making only a limited commitment to reduce the threat of shoulder-launched missiles, and critics both inside and outside the government say he is putting both passengers and the airline industry at risk.

The administration recently blocked two congressional measures to address the threat, including a comprehensive $9 billion plan to begin outfitting passenger jets with sophisticated anti-missile equipment. Instead, a new report by Bush's Department of Homeland Security says the administration is proposing a timetable in which the study and planning would not be completed until 2005, and the first

widespread installation of anti-missile technology would be years away, at best. Only $2 million would be spent in the next few months to assemble staff and data on the risk posed by portable missiles; up to $60 million would be allocated next year to continue the study.

But the threat posed by the lightweight portable missiles -- formally known as "man-portable air defense systems" -- has already been demonstrated in a decade of government research. Today, the administration's less-than-urgent approach to airline security is provoking angry attacks in Congress.

In a letter sent Thursday to Tom Ridge, Bush's secretary of homeland security, Sen. Robert Byrd ripped the administration for its seeming nonchalance. And the West Virginia Democrat reiterated his concerns in an interview with Salon. "When it comes to fighting in distant lands, the administration's attitude is, Spare no expense," he said. "But when it comes to fighting the war on American soil, the administration prefers to shop in bargain basements."

Even within the Defense Department, officials privately acknowledge that further study is not the solution to the problem. "We know what we need to do to solve the … problem in commercial aircraft," one official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "All we need is the funding to make it happen."

Airline security experts estimate it will cost $9 billion to $18 billion to equip the nation's passenger fleet with "directed infrared countermeasures systems" that can deflect a missile from its course. The Department of Homeland Security report to Congress called the anti-missile systems "the most promising" technology for protecting airliners. The systems use pulses of light to jam the missiles' guidance systems, a technology effective against the early-generation portable missiles that are most likely to be in the hands of terrorists. The most sophisticated anti-missile systems use lasers to confuse attacking missiles and are just beginning to enter service on military transport aircraft.

The cost is steep -- too steep, analysts say, to be borne by U.S. airlines that are already struggling with nearly $100 billion in debt. But the cost of *not* making the investment could be even greater. If terrorists shot down even one commercial airliner, they could potentially paralyze traffic in the $300-billion-per-year airline industry, with shockwaves spreading throughout the U.S. economy.

In an investigative report last year, Salon detailed how the commercial jets in the United States -- and the millions of passengers who fly on them -- are at risk from the small, light and easily hidden missile systems. They are relatively easy to fire, and when operated properly, they can bring down a jet at altitudes as high as 10,000 feet. More advanced versions can reach aircraft traveling at over 15,000 feet.

To be sure, there are skeptics who believe that the threat of shoulder-fired missiles is overblown. Steven Brill, the former publisher of Brill's Content and author of the new book "After: How America Confronted the September 12 Era," derides recent congressional moves to protect airlines from them. "It's a stupid policy initiative," Brill told Salon on Monday. A terrorist missile attack on an airliner "could happen tomorrow," he said, "but it is still a stupid initiative." In Brill's opinion, terrorists are more likely to strike at "mass transit, rail, air cargo, and office building ventilation systems." Those, he says, are the places where the government should be spending money to avoid terrorist attacks.

But that is a minority position. Those most familiar with the danger, regardless of political stripe, agree that the missiles pose a significant, immediate threat. Rep. John Mica, a Florida Republican who chairs the House aviation subcommittee, has called the risk "sobering," and at a Washington news conference in March, he said: "We can't afford to not act." A Boeing official privately described the shoulder-launched missiles as "the greatest current threat to the U.S. air transport system." Over the past year,

intelligence officials have grown increasingly concerned about the likelihood that al-Qaida has smuggled the launchers into the United States. The FBI in May 2002 issued a remarkable bulletin to local and state law enforcement agencies warning that al-Qaida possessed such missiles and would likely attempt an attack inside the United States.

On Election Day last November, the Transportation Security Administration convened a secret meeting in a secure conference room in Washington to inform a group of airline CEOs of the growing threat posed by the missiles. And just days ago, the Group of Eight industrial powers meeting in Evian, France, issued a sobering message: "We reiterate our deep concern about the threat posed to civil aviation by [the portable missiles], especially in the hands of terrorists or states that harbor them."

Although officials often cite the SA-7, the most widely proliferated and among the least capable shoulder-fired missiles, as the one terrorists are most likely to unleash against U.S. airliners, recent reports out of the Middle East indicate that Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based terrorist group with an annual budget the CIA says exceeds $200 million, has recently acquired SA-18 missiles from Syria. These super-sophisticated Russian-made missiles are far more accurate -- and potentially far more lethal -- than the SA-7 missiles used in the Mombasa attack last year. Should al-Qaida obtain these new-generation missiles from Hezbollah, Syria, or another willing broker, it will significantly enhance its ability to blast American airliners out of the sky.

Officials at the Department of Homeland Security declined repeated requests for comment on the Bush administration's airline security plan. The Air Transport Association, an industry group representing many of the commercial carriers, said yesterday that the federal government, and not the industry, should be responsible for such an overarching security concern.

"Defending against the threat of terrorist attacks has always been a fundamental government responsibility," said association spokeswoman Diana Cronan. "The airline industry, having been made aware by appropriate government authorities of concerns with the potential use of shoulder-fired missiles, is doing everything within its power to assist the government in its decision making as to the proper response to these and all terrorist threats."

In Congress, numerous U.S. officials have expressed alarm at the risk and have pressed for a commitment by the Bush administration to address it -- but so far without success. In the weeks leading up to the vote on funding the Iraq war, a measure sponsored by Rep. Steve Israel, D-N.Y., and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., proposed spending $9 billion to install anti-missile systems on commercial airliners; the measure failed, due largely to White House hostility. Then, the administration blocked a bipartisan plan, pushed by Mica, chair of the House aviation subcommittee, to spend $30 million in the current fiscal year to begin the process of adapting military technology to commercial airliners.

Instead, according to the Department of Homeland Security report, the Bush administration has committed to spend just $2 million in the current fiscal year, which ends September 31, mostly for creating a "special government staff office to manage the effort." For the 2004 budget year, the administration says, "project costs are not to exceed $60 million." But that $60 million is not actually in the budget plan provided to the Congress, and the Homeland Security report states that the administration will "not seek additional or supplemental funding for this effort." That prompted a pointed question in Byrd's letter last week to Ridge. "If the Administration does not plan to request additional funding for the [research]," he asked, "how will the activities in the program plan ... be funded?"

According to the Office of Management and Budget, the administration has made no efforts to seek to

have money shifted from one line item to another within the budget; nor has it sought new monies for anti-missile defense research. With Washington approaching the summer months, when little of substance gets done, and with the new fiscal year beginning shortly after the Congress returns to work in September, there is little evidence that the administration has firm spending plans for 2004.

And even if the $60 million does materialize, it's not enough, critics say. "Anything under $100 million is chump change," said one Capitol Hill source who asked to remain anonymous.

The net effect, Israel says, is that the White House is putting lives at risk. "The more we know about the threat of [portable missiles]," he said in an interview, "the more we know we need to defend against it. We were given a warning shot last year when shoulder-fired missiles missed an Israeli jet in Kenya, but we cannot count on their missing next time. I am happy that the administration has now acknowledged the threat, but they must follow through with real action ... We've debated it. We've held hearings on it. We've researched it. We've studied it. We've analyzed it. Now it's time to act on it."

Boxer sounded a similar theme in an interview Friday. "We have known for a long time that there is a credible threat of attack against our commercial aircraft," she said. "Although there is progress being made by the administration, this progress is too slow."

Byrd and others describe the White House budget plans as a window onto Bush's priorities. By this measure, the need to protect airliners from missile attack seems to be a back-burner issue.

Administration officials, of course, disagree. In recent months, the Department of Homeland Security has been trumpeting its efforts at surveying the areas around airports to identify the locations from which terrorists are most likely to launch a portable-missile attack. And in a letter last month to House Armed Services chairman Duncan Hunter, Defense Department general counsel William J. Haynes II seemed to back that plan in outlining his opposition to the Israel-Boxer bill. "The Department of Defense recommends exploration of other potentially effective measures such as counter-proliferation, airfield security, and improved border control," Haynes wrote.

But experts in thwarting missile attacks, both inside and outside the government, say that approach simply won't work. "Most of the current proposals for securing the airspace around airports are either unworkable or useless," says Daniel Goure, a defense analyst at the nonpartisan Lexington Institute who served on Bush's Department of Defense transition team.

One reason is that aircraft are vulnerable to even the oldest shoulder-launched missiles just before they land if they are within a long, roughly triangular swath of territory, about 4 to 6 miles wide, that extends 50 miles or more from the airport. An Air Force official recently noted that airport security measures are doomed to failure because the area around an airfield that needs to be secured in order to protect airliners ranges from 900 to 1,800 cubic miles of airspace.

"All a terrorist has to do is hide in the back of a pickup truck, under a tarp," said one intelligence official who asked not to be named. "When the driver of the truck spots a target aircraft and stops, all the shooter needs to do is throw off the tarp, stand and fire. It will only take a matter of seconds, and there is no way to stop that kind of attack."

Other signals reinforce the sense that the White House does not view the situation with urgency.

After reviewing the technology available for protecting passenger jets from missile attack, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the Homeland Security Council concluded that

only two companies are involved in developing directional infrared countermeasures systems: Northrop Grumman, an American company that builds the Air Force's new large aircraft laser system, and BAE, a U.K. firm working on a laser system for the Navy's tactical aircraft. But the review failed to identify a third alternative: Israeli defense contractor Rafael also builds a laser anti-missile system, and unlike the Northrop Grumman and BAE systems, Rafael's system has actually been tested on a commercial jet against live missiles -- something the Bush administration's plan does not envision doing until around 2005.

Rafael's test occurred from March 9 to 13 at Israel's southern Uvda Air Force Base and involved the very Boeing 757 that was attacked in Kenya. Using a variety of missiles, fired from several angles and distances, Rafael's system successfully jammed every missile fired at the jet. Despite these impressive results, and the lower cost of Rafael's system, it does not appear that this system is in the running to protect U.S. passengers.

Regardless of which system or systems might eventually receive approval from the Department of Homeland Security, none will be allowed onto airliners without the approval of the Federal Aviation Administration. Here again, the Bush administration is taking a go-slow approach. Current plans do not call for any action on FAA certification to begin until the autumn of 2004, and then the certification process is expected to take a year or more.

When asked whether the FAA could accelerate its assessment of whether anti-missile systems adversely affect such critical issues as aircraft electrical and hydraulic systems, weight balance, and flight response, an FAA spokeswoman said the agency "can do anything on an expedited basis if [it] has enough people." But extra people means extra money, and that does not appear to be forthcoming.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, security officials were able to restore passenger confidence by federalizing security personnel and implementing more rigorous passenger- and baggage-screening procedures. But if a U.S. passenger jet is shot out of the sky with a shoulder-launched missile, there are few confidence-building security improvements that could be implemented quickly to restore confidence in the security of the civil aviation system.

Even if anti-missile systems were installed aboard every airliner, that would still only be a part of the overall solution. Jets equipped with anti-missile defense systems can be hit by what the military calls "leakers" -- missiles that get through an aircraft's defensive systems. Because of this, the U.S. military conducts "live fire" testing, in which missiles are fired at aircraft and aircraft components to obtain data on how to build aircraft able to withstand missile hits. Robert E. Ball, widely recognized as an expert in the field of aircraft survivability and the author of the world's only textbook on the subject, notes that live-fire testing "costs very little compared to the cost of the aircraft and the value of the lives saved."

James O'Bryon, a retired Pentagon official who for years headed up the Defense Department's live-fire testing program, says that live-fire testing typically adds a fraction of 1 percent to the cost of aircraft, about the same as the expense that crash-testing adds to a new automobile. As an added benefit to this approach, the design modifications that allow an aircraft to survive a missile hit also provide a degree of protection against threats such as rocket-propelled grenades, high-caliber machine guns, and sniper rifles.

But this is another area where the Bush administration has been unwilling to spend money. "Until we can test commercial aircraft through live-fire testing," one Defense Department official told Salon, "we will remain in the dark as to how the aircraft respond to a [shoulder-launched missile] attack." It may be that for certain aircraft, relatively minor engineering modifications, such as moving or armoring

hydraulic lines, will result in making airliners far less likely to be lost if hit by a missile.

Many experts inside and outside government believe that it is almost inevitable that al-Qaida or another group will try to take down a U.S. airliner with a shoulder-launched missile. Vincent Cannistraro, a former chief of counter-terrorism operations for the CIA, says that al-Qaida has a history of learning from its failures; neither the government nor the public should assume that the next group of al-Qaida operatives sent to bring down a jet will duplicate the mistakes made in Mombasa, he says.

"Time and again," Byrd told Salon, "the Bush administration pays lip service to the nation's great homeland security needs, yet when push comes to shove, they steadily refuse to put forth the necessary resources. Words and promises need to be backed up with the money to make those words a reality."

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